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SUBJECT: SADDAM IN A CAGE; SECTARIAN STRIFE IN ALEXANDRIA:
EGYPTIAN MEDIA THEMES, OCTOBER 17 TO 23

REF: CAIRO 7987

1. Summary: While the Egyptian media covered the opening of Saddam Husseins trial extensively, there was little commentary. One opposition commentator decried the trial as "illegitimate, partial, and subordinate to the American occupiers." Violence between Muslims and Christians in Alexandria on October 21 received front page coverage on October 23, with reports claiming three dead and over a hundred injured. In the aftermath, the media reported on October 23 a plea for tolerance and friendship by Pope Shenouda and Sheikh Tantawi. Several commentators and one popular Egyptian cartoonist pointed the finger of blame for the violence at a "foreign conspiracy." Most commentators condemned the UNs Mehlis report, with daily newspaper Al-Ahram writing that its findings were "circumstantial evidence." Al-Gomhouriya, a pro-government daily critical of the U.S., claimed the Mehlis report was a result of "Americas hostile schemes in the Middle East." November parliamentary elections were also covered throughout the week. However, few commentators expressed much hope in the elections. "In Egypt there are no elections, only celebrations and fanfare," wrote one opposition editor. End summary.

2. Saddams trial: Egyptian TV (ETV) news coverage on October 18 and 19 centered on Saddams "not guilty" plea on the opening day of his trial. ETV's News Channel played the trial live on October 18. The Egyptian print press led with images of Saddam at the trial on October 19 accompanied by headlines such as "Saddam Challenges President of Court, Refuses to Recognize Courts Legality; ity; and Insists He Is President of Iraq" (Al-Ahram) and "Saddam and His Men in the Cage (i.e., the docket)" (Al-Akhbar). Noteworthy was the paucity of commentary on the trial, given the amount of media coverage it generated. An opposition Al-Wafd (circulation: 50,000) commentator consistently critical of the U.S. described Saddam's trial on October 22 as "illegitimate, partial, and subordinate to the American occupiers" and concluded that "President Bush and his wicked advisors should stand trial instead."

3. Sectarian strife in Alexandria: On October 23, independent newspapers Al-Masry Al-Youm (circulation: 25,000) and Nahdet Masr (circulation: 25,000) both published front-page images and reports of violence between Coptic Christians and Muslims in Alexandria, with the former reporting 3 deaths and 143 injuries after clashes on October 21 over a controversial DVD of a Coptic play that Muslim demonstrators accused of defaming Islam (reftel). All newspapers reported on a joint statement by Coptic Pope Shenouda and Al-Azhar Sheikh Tantawi that called for tolerance and friendship between Muslims and Copts. Channel Ones program Milaff Khass ("Special File") hosted several guests on October 22 who discussed the clashes. The chairman of Al-Azhars "Religious Dialog Committee" called for dialog to solve tensions and criticized the media and Copts who live in the U.S. for overreacting. Channel Ones popular program Al-Bayt Baytak ("Make Yourself at Home") also hosted several guests on October 22 to discuss the violence in Alexandria. Guest Adel Hamouda, editor of independent weekly Al-Fagr (circulation: 50,000), blamed pan-Arab satellite channels for inflaming sectarian divisions in the region. Another guest, a religious sheikh, blamed a "foreign conspiracy" for the increase of tensions between Muslims and Copts in Egypt. A popular back page cartoon in pro-government Al-Akhbar (circulation: 800,000) on October 23 showed a uniformed security official on the beach standing before a snake, whose body spells out the words "sectarian strife," and saying into his cell phone, "Its clear, sir, that its coming from abroad."

4. Why is everybody picking on Syria?: On October 22, the day after the Mehlis report's release, all major newspapers and TV news coverage reported that the report had implicated Syrian and Lebanese government officials in Rafik Hariri's murder. A commentary in Al-Wafd on October 21, written before the report's release, claimed that the U.S. and its allies were "trying to force Syria to accept a deal in which Syria would control its borders to prevent insurgents going into Iraq." On October 22, an unsigned

editorial in pro-government daily Al-Ahram (circulation: 750,000) claimed that the Mehlis report was "the start of a new and serious chapter against Syria by the U.S. and France." The Al-Ahram editorial also claimed that the report "includes only circumstantial evidence." However, a commentator writing in the same issue opined that the report "is so detailed to be beyond the shadow of a doubt." Pro-government daily Al-Gomhouriya (circulation: 500,000) - and a harsh critic of the U.S. published an unsigned editorial on October 22 that claimed the Mehlis report was "not surprising, because the results were known beforehand to anyone who is aware of Americas hostile schemes in the Middle East." Former Al-Gomhouriya Editor-in-chief Samir Ragab wrote in the same issue that the Mehlis report was "part of a U.S. scheme to drive a wedge between Syria and Lebanon, then assassinate Hariri, then force Syria to withdraw from Lebanon, then issue this report all in order to pave the way for future events."

15. November parliamentary elections: The media continued to highlight developments on November's parliamentary elections. Al-Masry Al-Youm and Al-Wafd reported on October 21 that more than 1,000 members of Al-Wafd Party, the Kifaya Movement, and the Muslim Brotherhood took part in an October 19 demonstration in Cairo in support of an opposition list of parliamentary candidates. Commentators in the opposition and independent press were critical of the elections. "Do not pin your hopes on the parliamentary elections," warned Abdel Halim Qandil, Editor-in-chief of opposition, Nasserite Al-Arabi (circulation: 20,000), on October 20. "In Egypt there are no elections, only celebrations and fanfare," Qandil continued. The Editor of independent weekly Sawt Al-Umma (circulation: 50,000) wrote on October 17 that "there is nothing new in the upcoming elections the same corruption, oppression, and forgery from the NDP." Sounding a note of optimism, however, was Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz, quoted on October 20 in English-language Al-Ahram Weekly as saying, "November's parliamentary elections have the potential to become a watershed in the nation's political life... I believe a new era is dawning, one in which normalcy will be restored and the state of emergency ended."

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